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The use of case study competitions to prepare students for the world of work

Monica Galloway Burke, Joelle Davis Carter and Aaron W. Hughey

Abstract: *As we continue into the new millennium, it is imperative that educational institutions equip graduates with the knowledge and skills that are increasingly needed and valued by business and industry. In this article, the authors argue that the case study approach and, specifically, case study competitions constitute an ideal pedagogical strategy for achieving this objective in an effective and efficient manner, with resulting benefits for both students and employers.*

Keywords: *case study method; case study competition; grounded learning experiences; work preparedness; graduate employability*

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Colleges and universities may be failing to prepare students adequately for the heightened demands of the 21st century work environment (Robinson, 2006). It is becoming increasingly apparent that educational institutions need to align themselves more closely with the needs of the businesses and industries they are designed to serve (Bowers and Metcalf, 2008). Moreover, educators sometimes find themselves in a philosophical battle over the fundamental mission of higher education and its relation to the ever-evolving requirements of commerce (Chung-Herrera *et al*, (2003). A critical factor in this debate is achievement of consensus with regard to the skills and competencies students need in order to be successful contributors to

the companies that will eventually employ them (Okeiyi *et al*, 1994; Tetreault, 1997)

Questions about how and what students learn in academia lie at the heart of a current, heated debate in higher education (Arum and Roksa, 2011). In some cases, this discourse has propelled institutions to use assessment tools that measure students' learning and engagement (Kuh, 2009). Student engagement is one process that can be used to understand better how students approach learning and acquire the theoretical knowledge and practical skills they will need to be successful after graduation (Astin, 1993; Del Rios and Leegwater, 2008; Porter and Swing, 2006)). Colleges and universities have become increasingly interested in

using engagement to assess career development and academic programmes, and to understand better those activities that best enhance student learning (Kuh, 2009).

Keeping the curriculum relevant

In undergraduate business education, several key questions have been posed concerning the amount of time majors spend studying and preparing for class compared to students in other disciplines. For example, Glenn (2011) suggested that the current perspectives of undergraduate business education is influenced by four principal ideas.

- (1) Business students are not as intellectual as students in other majors.
- (2) Larger sizes of junior and senior level business classes results in a lack of rigorous homework.
- (3) Over-emphasis on group work hinders students' ability to complete individual writing assignments and research effectively.
- (4) National reports on student engagement (such as the National Student Survey on Engagement in the USA) may be misleading and disregard the substantial time and effort business students invest in activities outside the classroom, such as internships.

Although these are valid concerns, there does seem to be substantial agreement between the public and private sectors that (1) soft skills such as communication and motivation are attractive to employers; and (2) these skills can be enhanced through team projects such as case study competitions (Errington, 2011). Bowers and Metcalf (2008) report that many college business programmes have undergone major curriculum transformations in order to increase the emphasis on critical skills sought by employers. Employers consistently indicate that they want their new employees to be proficient in teamwork, critical thinking and communication skills (Bowers and Metcalf, 2008). Case study competitions can serve as an optimal venue for undergraduate students to practise and hone these skills (Kunselman and Johnson, 2004).

Before proceeding with a discussion of the benefits associated with the case study method as a curricular component, however, it is important to consider its limitations. These include the observation that cases can often be divorced from actual business practice, they can accentuate a dependence on peer-teaching more than the acquisition of insights that are typically available through the instructor's experience and research, and they presuppose, sometimes erroneously, that students have the requisite critical thinking skills

necessary to process the cases adequately (Mitnick, 2009). Further, it has been asserted that the case study method can be inherently biased when facilitated by faculty who have consulted with the organization examined by the case; the particulars of many cases are often dated or purposefully modified in order to protect the integrity of current competitive strategies; and the effectiveness of the approach as a teaching tool often depends on the level of expertise of those who develop and facilitate the cases (Harris, 2012).

The case study method

As George Kuh (2003) asserts, '...the more students practise and get feedback on their writing, analyzing, or problem solving, the more adept they become'. Incorporating active learning and problem-based learning are useful methods for connecting theories and concepts to practice for students. According to Kolb (1984), this method allows students to participate in the learning process in a dynamic way, rather than as inert receptacles for knowledge, and it gives students the opportunity to study real-life situations in order to solve complex, open-ended problems.

Case study methods can provide many benefits for students (Kreber, 2001). For example, in 2004 Kunselman and Johnson reported, 'The case study method as an active learning tool provides students with a variety of important skills necessary for success both in and out of the classroom. Specifically, active learning helps students develop problem-solving, critical reasoning and analytical skills, all of which are valuable tools that prepare students to make better decisions and become better students and ultimately better employees' (Kunselman and Johnson, 2004, p 92).

Case studies have been used effectively in education to assist post-secondary students in connecting theory to practice in a variety of disciplines and at multiple levels (Butler *et al*, 2006) and in applying a more rational approach to circumstances that require finely-tuned decision-making procedures (Lee, 2007). Case studies have also been shown to be effective in fostering greater understanding of core content, precipitating qualitative self-reflection, encouraging peer collaboration for intellectual and professional growth, and augmenting self- and group-directed inquiry (Askill-Williams *et al*, 2007). Additionally, Sandstrom (2006) contends that case studies alleviate boredom in the typical classroom and facilitate both process and content learning in a variety of tangible ways.

Harrington *et al* (1996) note that case study methodology provides '...opportunities to recognize specific events as problematic; gain an understanding of them; reflect on them and on the consequences of

action; and devise sensible, moral and educative ways of acting in doing so' (p 26). For example, Harvard Business School's case study strategy (Rebeiz, 2011) explicitly aims to condition students to become future managers through the acquisition of a combination of functional skills (for example, strategic management), conceptual skills (for example, decision-making), interpersonal skills (for example, teamwork) and leadership skills (for example, communication). Moreover, the experiential learning process provided through case studies facilitates students' assimilation, synthesis and application of fundamental course concepts (Brannan *et al*, 2008). 'The case of Acme Plastics,' which accompanies this article as an Appendix, is an example of a situation in which students have to draw on their previously acquired knowledge and problem-solving skills to respond effectively to a realistic scenario.

Case study competitions

Case study competitions are widely recognized as useful co-curricular activities in the field of business education; they are considered excellent avenues for preparing students for the workforce (Umble *et al*, 2008). In a typical competition, teams of students are provided with a realistic scenario – usually a particular situation that requires developing an appropriate action plan (Rebeiz, 2011). After a specified time, each team presents its proposed solution to the problem to a panel of judges who are considered experts in the area represented in the case study; the judges subsequently decide which team developed the best response to the given circumstances (Corner *et al*, 2006). Various research studies support the positive learning outcomes associated with case study competitions (Menna, 2010; Corner *et al*, 2006). Case competitions provide an opportunity for students to work in self-directed teams, which mirrors what many of them will encounter after graduation (Kunselman and Johnson, 2004).

When developed and used in an array of formats and across business disciplines (for example, accounting, finance and marketing), the approach can increase confidence and equip students with the skills and experiences necessary to make them more successful and competitive employees (Maier-Lytle *et al*, 2010). Case study competitions '...provide competitors with opportunities to gain specialized knowledge, improve communication skills, develop a sense of teamwork, and heighten their chances in the job market' (Maier-Lytle *et al*, 2010). Traditionally, these contests have been associated with graduate programmes and have primarily involved students at MBA level (Rebeiz, 2011). Over the last couple of decades, however, case

study competitions have become much more common among undergraduate programmes (Maier-Lytle *et al*, 2010). Some empirical studies have suggested that undergraduate students' participation in case study competitions is positively linked to learning outcomes such as strong oral and written communication skills, more mature critical thinking skills and a heightened awareness of the inherent complexities associated with real-world problems and solutions (Umble *et al*, 2008).

These learning outcomes are also aligned with student engagement (Kuh, 2003). As mentioned above, student engagement refers to the amount of time and level of participation students tend to dedicate to purposeful activities that impact their overall educational experience (Astin, 1993; Chickering and Reisser, 1993; Kuh *et al*, 1991). As colleges and universities have integrated student engagement to a greater extent into their measures of student success, the potential for case study competitions to serve as a viable tool to assess overall institutional quality has become more evident and accepted (Errington, 2011; Ryan, 2008).

Grounded learning experiences

Grounded learning involves designing classroom activities and exercises that are interactive and empower students to collaborate and cultivate strong peer relationships (Corner *et al*, 2006). As a form of grounded learning experience, case study competitions expose students to real world experiences, encourage them to take ownership of their learning and help to assimilate their ideas into theory and practice (Rebeiz, 2011). Umble *et al*, (2008) found similar opportunities for enhanced team learning through complex, unstructured projects such as case study competitions: group-based activities tend to enhance the student learning experience and provide a better forum for engaging students in an active learning experience.

Case study competitions combine course content with real-world issues that students will encounter in a non-academic environment (Menna, 2010). This reinforces further the notion that grounded learning experiences are inherently superior to other pedagogical approaches for teaching the knowledge and skills deemed desirable by employers (Corner *et al*, 2006).

Although the effectiveness and success of case study competitions vary from institution to institution, the literature suggests that undergraduate programmes are still necessary for maintaining a supply of competent employees for business and industry (Glenn, 2011). Furthermore, it has been demonstrated that use of grounded learning experiences in both formal courses as well as co-curricular activities, including those

sponsored by various professional organizations, is effective in cultivating the competencies needed by today's employers (Bale *et al.*, 2013). However, despite the evidence supporting the relevance of case competitions to the efficacy of undergraduate education (Menna, 2010), little is known about how students perceive the applicability of these experiences, and the proficiency they acquire through them, to their concurrent coursework or their emerging careers (Kunselman and Johnson, 2004).

Conclusions

Student participation in case study competitions can positively influence their academic achievement and vocational development, has the potential to enrich the quality of business and other related courses, and could enhance their communication skills, making them more suited to negotiate an increasingly competitive work environment (Butler *et al.*, 2006). Hartman and McCambridge (2011) contend that effective communication skills will continue to be important to employers and organizational success. Participation in case study competitions is one means by which educators can emphasize further and reinforce the importance of effective communication skills, which are deemed an essential component of proficiency as an individual employee or as a member of a work team (Umble *et al.*, 2008). In addition, case study competitions have also been shown to assist in developing and refining students' capacity for efficient problem solving and decision making – capabilities most managers and supervisors routinely indicate they want in their employees (Kreber, 2001).

There is little doubt that use of case study competitions has a positive impact on students' educational achievements and supports the field of business education in a significant and concrete manner (Kunselman and Johnson, 2004). In particular, employers value the outcomes achieved through case study participation (Bale *et al.*, 2013). Johnson and Winterton (1999) noted that theories, concepts and tacit knowledge gained from performing tasks must be merged together in order to create an effective academic experience. Again, there is a feeling among some employers that educational institutions are not consistently producing graduates who possess the requisite knowledge and skills to compete successfully in today's global business environment (Hertzman, 2006). Many graduates may lack the basic skills needed to be effective and are not ready for the demands that will be placed on them in the workforce (Peddle, 2000). Wider use of case study competitions could go a long way toward remedying this situation.

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Appendix

Example of a case study competition: the case of Acme Plastics

Note: This case was developed by Aaron W. Hughey, Professor and Programme Coordinator in the Department of Counseling and Student Affairs at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green, Kentucky (USA). He has used it to facilitate case study competitions in academic settings and as a training exercise with several regional companies.

Please read the following scenario. Your team will have 20 minutes to make a presentation to the judges on how this situation should be handled. Included in your plan should be (1) overall goals – that is, the desired outcomes of the action plan you devise; (2) short-term objectives in support of those goals; and (3) long-term objectives in terms of those goals.

Background information

Acme Plastics is a medium-sized injection moulding business that manufactures plastic containers in a variety of different sizes and shapes. Acme is headquartered in Owensboro, Kentucky, and has three factories: one in Owensboro, one in Nashville, and one in Atlanta. Overall, Acme has a workforce of approximately 2,000 employees: 1,000 at Owensboro and 500 in each of its other locations. Acme emphasizes production efficiency; that is, the size of the workforce is closely related to Acme's industry market share.

Throughout its 10 year history, Acme has always practised a 'Just In Time' production philosophy. Consequently, it maintains very little stock on hand. In most cases, containers are shipped within 24 hours of production. All three facilities are currently operating around the clock in order to satisfy the needs of Acme's various customers.

The workforce at each plant is divided into self-directed work teams. Most teams consist of employees who work in the same department, although team leaders also meet regularly to discuss problems and issues relevant to the entire factory. Acme has a strong commitment to its philosophy of 'Quality First!' Under 'normal' production circumstances, Acme has a defect rate of less than one per 10,000 containers manufactured – a fact that has helped to establish its reputation as one of the best injection moulding companies in the industry.

It should be noted, however, that the defect rate tends to rise quickly, to the point of rendering its processes incapable, when production demands are pushed beyond 'normal' levels.

The situation

One of Acme's largest customers is Continental Petroleum, which uses Acme's plastic containers to package its motor oil. Continental selected Acme as its 'primary supplier' due to Acme's strict adherence to quality combined with its equally strict commitment to making deliveries on time. Roughly 65% of Acme's business is directly related to its contract with Continental: the Nashville plant was built specifically to manufacture oil containers for Continental. Although some production for Continental takes place in Atlanta and Owensboro, over 80% of its oil containers are made in Nashville. Its machines were engineered specifically for this purpose and its machine operators have received extensive training (both from Acme and Continental) in the production of oil containers.

Unfortunately, a platform collapsed at the Nashville plant last week, causing massive equipment damage. Although no one was seriously injured, a substantial amount of structural damage to the facility was also incurred. Maintenance crews and outside contractors have been working day and night to repair the damage, but best estimates are that it will take approximately three weeks to get the plant back into production. Even then, it could take up to a week longer to stabilize production.

The problem

Continental Oil contacts Acme and indicates that the response to its recent advertising campaign has been overwhelming. Consequently, orders for its motor oil have increased by 30% almost overnight. The shelves are empty and retailers are becoming more and more anxious to receive new shipments of Continental products. Its refineries are in the process of gearing up to near-maximum output.

In short, Continental needs an additional five million containers within the next week. This has never been a problem in the past – which is one of the reasons Acme has the Continental contract. If Acme is unable to fill the order, at the same level of quality (capability), then Continental will be forced to contract with another supplier for its containers, which could call into question Acme's status as 'primary supplier'. This has always been understood by the management at Acme and it is even in the terms of their contract.

The task

You are the management team at Acme headquarters in Owensboro. What do you do?